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ABSTRACT

The paper presents tips for parents of children with learning problems. It describes the emotional side effects of low achievement which may include low self-esteem, clinical depression, "learned helplessness," suicidal ideation, acting out behavior, low frustration tolerance, guilt feelings, interpersonal problems, withdrawal, running away, truancy, juvenile delinquency, and drugs and alcohol. Among the 43 suggestions to parents are: focusing on the positive aspects, providing consistency, getting help from professionals, making use of technology, helping the child improve his/her organizational skills, reading to children, avoiding threats or unkeepable promises, and emphasizing the importance of listening. Finally the paper identifies 20 possible reasons why capable children may have difficulty learning such as lack of motivation, lack of impulse control, lack of product orientation, fear of failure, procrastination, and too little or too much self-confidence. (DB)

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Psychological Problems of Children with Learning Difficulties

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The child who has difficulty learning in the school setting may have other emotional problems as well. Being unable to learn, having dyslexia or a learning disability can wreack havoc with a child's life and his/her growth and development. In today's highly industrialized society, the ability to read, learn quickly and efficiently and remember material is imperative. Unfortunately, there are "below average" children, there are "underachievers", there are kids who have "developmental lags." These students have emotional side effects, some of which are debilitating. This paper will review some of these "side effects" and indicate briefly what parents can do to help their children.

Most children who have difficulty learning also experience poor self-esteem. Although not identified as "slow" or stupid, the children in the "turtle" group know they are not doing as well as the "rabbit" group (or the red, green or blue team). Their "report cards" of course, also reflect their progress whether letters, numbers or words are utilized.

As their difficulties continue, self-confidence wanes. They begin to feel less able and approach academics more and more apprehensively. Often this lack of self-confidence permeates to other areas - sports, interpersonal relations, and family functionings.

If problems continue or if an arena of success is not found, feelings of worthlessness begin to crop up. Self-statements such as "I'm no good" begin to haunt the cognitions of the child.

Some children become clinically depressed. They become sad, lethargic, and morose. The duration, frequency and intensity of this "sadness" must be examined and psychiatric or psychological referral strongly considered. Medication may be helpful and counseling and therapy needed.

Others develop a syndrome of "learned helplessness." They begin to feel that they will fail no matter how much they study or how hard they try. Teachers often give certain "messages" regarding their expectations. Often certain remedial techniques are ineffective. Although much time, energy and effort are invested in the child, the learning disorder is so severe (due to brain damage or whatever) that few, if any, techniques are successful.

In certain cases students begin to have "suicidal ideation". Our children are killing themselves at very high rates and this is a major cause for concern. Even gifted children are vulnerable. Shaughnessy and Nystul (1985) have given some of the warning signs of suicide and what parents/teachers can do to prevent this great loss.

Still other children become "behavior problems" and engage in "acting out" behavior. They are angry, frustrated, cannot verbally express the deep emotions they are feeling and thus "act out" by throwing chairs, fighting, engaging in insolent, defiant, negativistic behavior.

Some kids may develop "low frustration tolerance" or this may be a causative factor in their difficulty. At any rate, these children have no patience, want immediate gratification and cannot defer anything to a future time. They may have difficulty concentrating and may want to

complete their work very quickly so as to "go and play." They have difficulty studying for tomorrow's test because they want to watch T.V. NOW!

Many children and adolescents begin to feel guilty - they feel they have "let down" their parents and teachers. They begin to punish themselves in any number of ways.

Nocturnally, some children with learning problems have bad dreams, night tremors, may sweat excessively, may sleepwalk or may bang their heads against their pillows. Still others grind their teeth during the night (bruxism). Others wet the bed (enuresis) or defecate in their bed during the night (encopresis). Some kids have repetitive dreams or may sleep poorly (especially the night before a big exam). On the other hand, some children sleep excessively (a sign of depression).

Inter-personal problems often develop. Some regard relationships apprehensively. They are labeled "nerds", "retards" and other euphemisms and approach other peers carefully or cynically. Obviously, trust is difficult to establish and maintain.

Withdrawal is used by other children. They may or may not appear sad, may manifest a loss of appetite or may spend inordinate amounts of time in their rooms or public library or even at school. The local hang-out may be their favorite haunt. The more a parent tries to draw the child out of his/her shell, the more often they withdraw.

Anorexia nervosa is a variant on the "withdrawal' theme. Food may be the one thing the anorexic has control over - a final decision.

Some children with learning problems may "drop out" by either running away or via truancy. School phobia has increased dramatically over the past decade. Junvenile delinquency may become a means whereby the child/adolescent can obtain some acceptance from peers, and achieve a feeling of success. Drugs and alcohol are also becoming increasingly prevalent and teen-age pregnancy is rampant.

Certainly there are other psychological problems manifested by children who have learning difficulties. Test anxiety and/or math anxiety may stem from certain areas of weakness. Other talents such as music, art, drama and leadership may be neglected. Potential is wasted. What follows are some suggestions for parents to aid their child. In extreme cases of learning disability, it is wise to consult specialists.

What Can Parents Do?

1. Focus on the Positives - Parents must seek out those areas of strength and reward the child for his/her efforts in those areas. As the title of one book says "Catch 'Em Being Good."
2. Parents can set up a consistent time and place for their child to study and review his/her work. Distractions (T.V., radio) should be eliminated or minimized. Consistency is the key. Every day (Saturday and Sunday included) the student must review and read. The child should have his/her tools of the trade ready and available - rulers, pencil sharpeners, folders, staplers, etc.

3. Get help from professionals. The teacher can be immensely helpful. An I.Q. test can reveal strengths and weaknesses. Glover (1979) has an excellent text in this area.
4. Find the child's "preferred" mode. Some kids learn better through their eyes than ears. They learn through pictures, charts, graphs and diagrams. Others listen well and absorb through their ears. Many learn in a 1-2-3, A-B-C, first, second, third, highly rote, concrete, simple fashion. Others can assimilate the big picture in a simultaneous manner. Adults, too, have preferred modes. Some bake a cake by following exact, precise, specific directions from a recipe. Others "wing it" with a little of this - a touch of that and cook by "feel."
5. In order to minimize anxiety, let the child know he/she should simply do the best that he/she can. Essentially what more can we expect of children?
6. Let your child know that you love him/her. Let it be unconditionally. You should love a child because he/she is your offspring, not because he/she got straight A's or made the honor roll.
7. Parents can do other non-classroom educational things - museums, plays, zoos, malls, tours, travel and expose their child to the world around them.

8. Parents can explore personal computers and computer disks. Some can be helpful for learning and review. Some disks can facilitate learning. Some are garbage and a rip-off! Be careful! A personal computer is a major investment. A better investment would be in a good tutor with good clinical skills who has experience dealing with children who have learning difficulties.

9. Consider buying a small cassette recorder for the child to tape lectures in difficult subjects. We have also found that children who read into tape recorders, then listen to themselves, remember more.

10. Check his/her diet. Feingold (1975) and others have found substantial improvement with many children when additives, caffeine and sugar are removed from children's diets. Junk food should be eliminated and replaced with fruit and protein. The child should also be checked for allergies. In some instances children have side-effects from certain medications, thus making them drowsy, or agitated.

11. Parents should explore their children's organizational skills. Check his/her desk, locker at school and notebooks. Are they clean, clear, neat, specific and well organized? Does the child know where his/her spelling, math, history, reading papers are? Does he/she have the proper tools of the trade, i.e., book marks, pencils, pens, rulers, erasers and paper to write on? A memo pad for homework assignments?

12. What about your child's emotional environment? Is there a pending divorce or a recent one? Is there tension and fighting at home? Is he/she sad or depressed about the loss of a friend or pet? Has he/she failed to "make the team", or is he/she temporarily injured?
13. Consider a tutor - a college student may be helpful or a substitute teacher. All too often a parent gets frustrated by a child's lack of progress and yelling and screaming result. End consequence is anger, aggravation and frustration.
14. Invest in index cards as a tool of learning. They are small, and important notes can be reviewed on the school bus. Vocabulary and spelling words can be reviewed.
15. Parents must positively reinforce for both effort and for success. Praise for trying is important. Optimism is the order of the day. Many problems do "clear up" later on.
16. The parents vocabulary and conversation can be an important stimulus. By talking, discussing and conversing, parents are building their child's vocabulary and syntax.
17. The television, record player and radio must be controlled. The average American home has the T.V. on almost 8 hours a day - that's a lot of study time. Parents must judiciously censor what their kids watch and limit "junk" programs.

18. Consult with your child's teachers on an on-going basis - weekly, if possible. It is critical to be "on top of things." Often kids do not turn in their homework - this effects their grades. They "forget" special assignments. They do not hand in extra credit work. Parents need to check and double check - leave home and work phone numbers and stamped envelopes for communication.
19. If your child is involved in sports take the time to watch him or her. This will "boost" his/her morale. However, do not let the child become over-involved in too many sports to the detriment of academics.
20. Do not compare siblings. Too often parents make statements that "put down" one child or "hold up" another. Teachers, too, often remark "Your brother Tommy was so bright - why are you having trouble?"
21. Parents can work on remediation at home. There are a number of games that improve vocabulary, general information (Trivial Pursuit) and many other domains.
22. Parents can read to their children. This is important especially at an early age. They can learn that reading is a pleasurable, relaxing activity. Glover, Bruning, and Filbeck (1983) have discerned that there is a relationship between parents reading to their children and later success in reading.

23. Parents must recognize that 4 years of college is not the only option for their children. Technical, vocational and occupational schools abound and merit investigation.

24. Parents must also understand that not all children grow intellectually or maturationally at the same rate. Some kids plateau periodically, while others lag behind for several years then "spurt." Other very bright students in high school "burn out" in college for whatever reason.

25. Sometimes, personality conflicts do exist between teachers and pupils. Some male children simply do not relate well to females and vice versa. A very telling question to pose to your child is "Do you like your teacher?" If the child says "no", parents first have some important information. In certain school systems, parents can request a transfer through the guidance office. The reasons for the child's negative response should also be explored! Does the teacher demand too much, expect too much? Or are there other personality factors?
Often kids respond with a shrug or in a nonchalant manner. This, too, is to be expected. Often kids have no feelings one way or the other - school is just something they have to do. As a school psychologist, I have asked teachers if they liked certain kids. Their answers are very revealing.

26. Too often, parents believe that 2 or 3 "study halls" a day will help a student learn more or better. It may be better for a student to explore art, music, home economics or some other non-academic subject than to stagnate in a study hall.
27. A critical emphasis, I feel, is the point that learning (and parenting) is a kindergarten to twelfth grade job. Parents must start early and not "slack off". Too often, parents, seeing improvement after a few months, return to their previous ruts.
28. Consider comics to help with reading - especially when the child is young. An effort should be made to gradually use more and more picture books and then high interest/low vocabulary books. Hopefully books can be tied to a child's interests. Visits to the library should be consistent. Some children have problems with transference of information from vertical to horizontal planes and vice versa.
29. Parents should watch for squinting, and consider an opthamological exam if even the school nurse's eye exam reveals 20/20 vision. There are a number of other problems (tracking) which could be affecting a child's learning.
30. Help your child learn to learn i.e. help him learn how to use the dictionary, the encyclopedia, indexes, tables of contents and the card catalog in the library.
31. Help your child to ask questions when he/she doesn't under tand or comprehend. Often children can't verbalize or succinctly phrase their inability to understand.

32. Help by giving your child very specific concrete examples.

33. Help your kids take tests. Here are some suggestions:

    1. Read the directions.
    2. Answer the easy questions first.
    3. Read true and false questions very carefully.
    4. Never leave a blank.
    5. Teach your child the process of elimination.
    6. Never change an answer unless you can think of 2 good reasons to do so.
    7. Ask if you should guess.
    8. Prompt the child to discuss alternative answers with the teacher.
    9. Have the student monitor his/her time.
    10. Be careful if you do skip a question - make sure you go back and fill it in.
    11. Get a good night's sleep the night before.

34. Expect your child to do well - in whatever - that he/she will be the world's best short order cook, phlebotomist, interior decorator, telephone repair person or hair dresser. Further, that you expect him or her to be a good human being. A good person - kind, considerate, caring, loving and generous.

I am reminded of a story told by Dr. Viktor Frankl. He recounted the tale of a Viennese garbage collector - who collects trash and broken toys and other items by day and then repairs these toys at night to give

to children in the orphanage. Who will cast the first stone at this lowly "garbage man" who is contributing immensely to society?

35. Parents can keep a scrapbook of their child's good papers, accomplishments and achievements. Perfect papers can be displayed on the refrigerator. Relatives love to see the school work of nephews, grandchildren and nieces.
36. Don't make promises that you can't or won't keep. Please don't promise your child a trip to Disneyland if he/she passes math or whatever. You may not be able to "pay-up," the child will be disappointed and you will have lost an important part of your relationship - TRUST.
37. Also, don't make threats. You really can't and won't break your kid's arm if they don't pass all their subjects.
38. As corny as it sounds, discuss what the child learned in school today. Leo Buscaglia tells of his Italian parents and their daily dinner discussions and how he would run to a book or encyclopedia in order to have a "fact" ready to pacify dear dad.
39. Have plenty of reading material available in the home. Magazines, newspapers, books, T.V. guides, the Sunday comics should all be available. Allow your child to buy magazines as reinforcers or rewards for good work instead of candy or gum.
40. Help kids work on their handwriting. Messy garbled "chicken scratch" is hard for both the student and teacher to read. Buy your child a Pilot fine point pen - not only will he/she get

respect, but it will slow down their writing and make it more legible. It will also help inculcate neatness. Teachers, for whatever reason, do believe that the child who writes in a neat fashion is more intelligent. I suppose impressions, if favorable, do last.

41. Encourage letter writing - to a pen pal, to relatives - for free materials. There is a clear relationship between writing and academic success. The more students write, the clearer they think, and the more successful they are in later life.

42. Don't neglect your child's physical health. If he/she appears tired, lethargic, a physical exam may be in order. Several underachievers I have tested suffered more from anemia than academic problems. Some kids complain of pain that parents label "growing pains." We now know that Osgood-Schlatter's disease is responsible.

43. Emphasize the importance of listening in class. Emphasize the importance of wanting to learn. Help your child to imagine getting good grades on a test or report card. Encourage positive thinking and positive self-statements. Don't allow the child to put him or herself down. The parents must, too, believe in what they are saying and in what the child can do.

Finally, explore the reasons why your son/daughter may be doing poorly. Sternberg (1986) has listed some of the reasons why intelligent folk often do not succeed. These factors follow.

Why Good, Average (and Bright) Kids Have Difficulty Learning

1. Lack of motivation - Some kids simply don't like school They would rather be out riding their bikes or playing or working on the farm.
2. Lack of impulse control - The child acts impulsively, rushes through his/her work, and does not pay attention.
3. Lack of persistence/perseveration/ or perseverance - Some kids become bored quickly or tire readily.
4. Capitalizing on the wrong abilities - If a child has artistic or musical talent, don't force him/her to be a mathematician
5. Inability (or difficulty) in translating thought into action.
6. Lack of product orientation. The child does not realize the importance of book reports, homework, and assignments.
7. Task completion problems and lack of follow through - The child begins their homework, but never quite gets around to finishing it.
8. Failure to initiate.
9. Fear of failure.
10. Procrastination - Putting off studying, homework and reviewing will hurt a child academically.
11. Misattribution of blame - Many children blame the teacher for their poor grades. They develop an external locus of control and blame others instead of accepting responsibility for their failures.
12. Excessive self pity.

13. Excessive dependency.
14. Wallowing in personal difficulties.
15. Distractibility and lack of attention - for whatever reason.
16. Spreading oneself too thick or too thin - Overfocusing on one subjects or becoming involved in too many outside activities can very often hurt a child's grades.
17. Inability to delay gratification - In order to succeed in school, and in life, we all must be able to put off till tomorrow. The ability to defer gratification is an essential part of success, but one that has been rarely discussed.
18. Inability or unwillingness to see the forest from the trees.
19. Lack of balance between critical, analytic thinking and creative, synthetic thinking and
20. Too little or too much self-confidence - Failing to study can be very harmful. Some kids think the "know it all." Other kids are apprehensive, anxious, nervous, and this anxiety interferes with scholastic performance.

One final word to parents - patience! Parents/teachers must have the patience of several hundred saints, (actually on-going religious service may be helpful also).

Summary/Conclusions:

This paper has endeavored to review some of the problems faced by the child with learning difficulties and offer some suggestions for parental intervention.

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